



Caught In-Between

*Intermediality in Contemporary Eastern European
and Russian Cinema*

EDITED BY

ÁGNES PETHŐ

EDINBURGH STUDIES IN FILM AND INTERMEDIALITY

Caught In-Between

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Intermediality in Contemporary Eastern European and Russian Cinema

Edited by Ágnes Pethő

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Edinburgh University Press Ltd
The Tun – Holyrood Road
12(2f) Jackson’s Entry
Edinburgh EH8 8PJ

Typeset in 11/13 Adobe Garamond Pro
IDSUK (DataConnection) Ltd, and
printed and bound in Great Britain

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4744 3549 9 (hardback)
ISBN 978 1 4744 3550 5 (webready PDF)
ISBN 978 1 4744 3551 2 (epub)

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Introduction: The Art of In-Betweenness in Contemporary Eastern European Cinema

Ágnes Pethő

CONVERGING APPROACHES

At a time when all sorts of transitions are taking place in the post-communist societies of Europe, when former borders have collapsed but differences remain, when the relationship between the cultures of the East and the West have become more complicated, paradoxical or tense than ever before, when the idea of national cinemas has been eroded by transnational productions, yet films still address issues grounded in local realities, in short: when in-betweenness has become the key term in almost all aspects of life, quite a lot of Eastern European films seem to resort, time and again, to a diversified poetics of intermediality, i.e. to an aesthetic highlighting cinema's relationship with the other arts and the media complexity of moving images. Even in less ostentatious and more covert forms, intermediality – as a veritable art of in-betweenness – appears as a way to register all kinds of ambivalences that pervade the culture of the region and is capable of becoming an efficient catalyst of self-reflection.

Despite the major historical events that swept away the past regimes and clearly marked the beginning of a new era, the slice of time referred to as 'contemporary', as we see in the title, is not easy to delimit, for historical events seldom coincide with paradigm shifts in the arts and aesthetic phenomena often persist across the ages. The term was therefore applied with certain flexibility in the selection of works analysed (or referred to) in this volume. Not only films that were made after the collapse of the Iron Curtain were considered, but also works of highly influential authors whose *oeuvre* connect the period before the fall of communism with that of the new generations of filmmakers, and which are important for understanding the major strategies of cinematic intermediality visible in the Eastern European cinemas of today.

The ways in which these cinemas harness the potential of intermedial and inter-art relations is not a widely researched subject in film (or media) studies. There are, however, important forerunners of the essays published in this

book that need to be pointed out. In what follows, I will proceed with a concise survey of these previous researches in which such a subject has emerged so far¹ taking into consideration their main goals, the topics that have been discussed, and how they have enriched our knowledge of intermediality in Eastern European cinemas. Such an examination, inevitably, brings forth first of all the heterogeneity of the scholarly literature on intermediality. Defined as a subject area, as a research concept that we seek to understand and not as a particular theory, intermediality has always been addressed from diverse standpoints.² Furthermore, researches vary from explicitly focusing on the key notion of intermediality to only indirectly touching upon relevant issues connected to it, and also, from more abstract theorisations to in-depth analyses of specific instances examined in their historical context. Viewing this wide spectrum of approaches as they converge around questions of intermediality in contemporary Eastern European cinemas, and starting with concept-based studies, we see that although far from featuring prominently as a source of inspiration, films from this region have provided some examples even for the scholarship that aims to forge a more general theory of intermediality. Such scholarship pursues the study of intermediality through the identification of a set of categories describing media relations and interactions, a methodology which stems from semiotics and is informed by a broader perspective of media studies. Lars Elleström's researches have systematically contributed to laying the foundations of intermediality studies understood in this way through the clarification of its basic concepts. His analysis (2014: 62–86) of three films by Jan Švankmajer may reveal both the strengths and the limitations of this kind of approach. He uses the films of the Czech author of animated short films as examples to hold up a theoretical construction, and offers a close reading of these films with the purpose of explaining the 'general media transformation principles' (2014: 63) that he outlines. Accordingly, Elleström deliberately refrains from interpreting the films.³ A similar methodology is employed by Asunción López-Varela Azcárate (2015), who explores Švankmajer's *Jabberwocky* (1971) as an inventive, contemporary form of *ekphrasis* comparing it to Lewis Carroll's poem with the same title included in the novel *Through the Looking-Glass* and Simon Biggs's 2010 digital video installation *reRead*, inspired by the same literary text. These studies identify specific types of media connections and the fact that these occur in moving images is of secondary importance to them seeking no connections with theories of film. The films themselves are observed *in vitro* (extracting them from their 'live/natural environment'), and therefore the fact that they come from Eastern Europe also becomes irrelevant. They are not interested in what intermediality can convey in the context of a specific aesthetic, culture or reality, instead, such approaches

seek to unravel it through a conceptual framework applicable across media and pursue refined analyses of media relationships on a more abstract level.

We also find examples for the reverse, in which case analyses of films from the recent history of these cinemas touch upon questions regarding the connections of moving images with other arts and media without necessarily or exclusively applying the categories elaborated in the theoretical writings on intermediality. Articles that we can include under this umbrella deal with: strategies of literary adaptations in the region (e.g. Gelencsér 2008)⁴; the creative transformations and hybridisations of moving images in the realm of experimental cinema (e.g. Müllner 2008, Gilić 2010, Dánél 2015, Gelencsér 2015, Lipiński 2015); types of word-and-image relations (e.g. Varga 2008), the inspiration of paintings for the creation of sets and the overall atmosphere of the images (e.g. Zvonkine 2015); the role of music (e.g. Mazierska and Győri 2018); the appearance of new media within films (Kosmala 2014); the exploration of new media forms in feature-length experimental films (i.e. incorporating the multi-screen moving picture installation format into a painterly essay film by Benedek Fliegauf, analysed by Faluhelyi 2011; and the mixing of fiction film, documentary and interactivity offered by a DVD in György Pálfi's *I'm not Your Friend*-project, discussed by Stöhr 2012).

At the same time, we may note, that along with a variety of topics of interest both for the history of film and for intermedial studies, there are also certain authors whose works seem to invite an approach from an intermedial viewpoint and whose films have drawn attention to the relevance of intermedial phenomena in the region, prompting many scholars to investigate their intermedial style more explicitly. Béla Tarr, one of the leading figures in contemporary Eastern European film, has emerged at the same time as one of the key authors whose films have informed our understanding of intermediality (see Király 2008, 2010, 2015b, 2016a, and Pethő 2014b, 2015b, 2016). Lech Majewski, the versatile Polish author, active as a visual artist, poet, composer and film director, has been the subject of several articles (e.g. Tes 2013; Pethő 2014a: 483–8, 2015a: 157–72; Chakravorty 2015; Twardoch 2015). Other authors of interest in this respect include Alexander Sokurov, whose films appear like a palimpsest of the visual arts (see the essays of Hänsgen 2011 and Rascaroli 2017: 26–47), or Andrzej Żuławski (who interweaves the reflexive use of photography with a sophisticated array of literary allusions, according to Bene 2015). Directors of New Romanian cinema, who received much acclaim after 2000 with a series of successful films at international film festivals, brought about a re-evaluation of Romanian cinema as a whole, including the appreciation of their intermedial features (see Király 2016b and Sándor 2016, 2019 on Lucian Pintilie's films; Pethő 2011b on Mircea Daneliuc, Pfeifer 2017 and Pethő 2019 on Corneliu Porumboiu; Pieldner

2016b and Mironescu 2017 on Radu Jude; Blos-Jáni 2019, on the films of Nae Caranfil; Lutas 2019 on the works of Cristi Puiu).

UNRAVELLING THE CINEMATIC POETICS OF INTERMEDIAILITY

Many of the contributors to this book have laid the groundwork for pursuing the poetics of cinematic intermediality more directly through their previous publications written within the framework of two consecutive research projects hosted by the Sapientia Hungarian University in Cluj-Napoca and funded by the Romanian Ministry of National Education between 2013 and 2019.⁵ The first concentrated on figurations of intermediality in Central and Eastern European films, the second, assuming a wider perspective, aimed to contextualise these within changing forms of in-betweenness in contemporary cinema.⁶ The comparative analyses which have been published and which draw parallels among authors in Eastern Europe or within an even broader circle in world cinema, describe general trends in which stylistic variations with specific meanings could be discerned, and shift the focus from the director/author or the artwork in a traditional film historical context to the interpretation of particular figurations of cinematic intermediality explored along the avenues opened up under the horizon of post-structuralism and more recent philosophies of film.⁷ These studies, which can be seen as immediate predecessors of this book, are concerned less with an abstract set of relationships (i.e. a kind of grammar viewed in semiotic terms), and more with the unique configurations of intermediality and their sensuously perceivable excess, uncovering at the same time the way the poetics of intermediality can connect not only arts or media, but also art and life. They take into consideration the ways that media relations enable us to grasp the complexity of reality and culture, to observe various tensional (emotional, existential, etc.) states of in-betweenness, along with anxieties, relations of power and conflict characteristic of Eastern Europe. Implicitly, they assess the significance of intermediality regarding the cinemas of Eastern Europe by looking at it as something that actively ‘performs’ something, and not merely ‘is’.⁸ Without summing up in detail all the articles published previously that could be mentioned here, I will briefly attempt to outline the main clusters of ideas which we can distinguish around figurations of intermediality as ‘a poetics of in-betweenness’, and which have significantly shaped the aesthetic of contemporary Eastern European films.⁹

A significant import of these kind of researches has been to reveal intermedial practices which yield meditations upon history and time, cultural and personal identity through remediating (thus revitalising) or imitating archive imagery, earlier forms of moving images and photography, and through an emphasis on

multisensual aspects of the moving image. The in-depth analyses written by Judit Pieldner (2014a, 2015) of films made by the Hungarian auteurs Gábor Bódy and András Jeles in the decades that preceded and immediately followed the fall of communism, demonstrate how the archaeology of cinema performed in such films, i.e. the confrontation with cinema's materiality, historicity and temporality can create productive tensions between the documentary value of the image and its rhetorical dimension. By resisting the canonical representational modes of history, they reveal a more intimate relationship with both historical past and the history of the cinematic medium itself. 'Sensing the texture, the fabric of the film, surrendering to lack of perfection, incompleteness, distortion and disappearance' (Pieldner 2014a: 74) in Bódy's *American Torso* (*Amerikai anzix*, 1975) can activate a kind of 'non-figurative consciousness' through which the film becomes 'capable of telling our own story, our own disappearance' (Pieldner 2014a: 74). Melinda Blos-Jáni (2018) investigates similar techniques in a selection of contemporary Eastern European found footage films dealing with the socialist past and the regime changing events. She argues that by deliberate reframing and intensifying the medium-specific (i.e. both auditory and visual) 'noises' of the archival sources, or by an artificially created visual precariousness a new type of spectatorial awareness is created that goes hand in hand with a type of historical consciousness that is not yet solidified. Such films 'seem to challenge the concept of the frame as a container of images, or the frame as the boundary of a meaningful whole, instead they feature the image as a surface' (Blos-Jáni 2018: 154). Imperfections and noises veiling, rupturing or erasing the images become strategies of excess intended to reject 'the comforts of visibility in order to lure the viewers into their own quest for hidden meanings and memories' (Blos-Jáni 2018: 155).

Archival footage is combined with a series of literary, painterly and musical allusions in András Jeles's *Parallel Lives* (*Senkiföldje*, 1993), a film rendering the ineffable experience of the Holocaust from the perspective of a child. Pieldner finds the dense cultural references and the media hybridity of the film indicative of 'the impotence of art and aesthetics in the face of inhumanity' and of 'the incommensurability of the cohabitation – of the "parallel lives" – of the two faces of human culture, the scale of inhumanity and the aesthetic regime of culture' (Pieldner 2015: 137–8). Katalin Sándor (2016) looks at Lucian Pintilie's *The Oak* (*Balanța*, 1992) and reveals in a close reading how the film confronts the communist past and the present marked by the after-effects of dictatorship. By incorporating a diegetic Polaroid camera and a home movie, *The Oak* displays a reflexive preoccupation with the mediality, the non-transparency and the sociocultural constructedness of the image. The analysis shows that the film can be regarded as a critical historical response to the social and representational crises linked to the communist

era, but at the same time, it may be symptomatic of the social, cultural, political anxieties of post-1989 transition. The essay also elaborates on the way in which photographs may generate a media-reflexive discourse in a film as part of a reflection upon the intersections of personal and collective history.

The blending of photography and film into ‘photofilmic’ images, on the other hand, can be seen not only as a typical phenomenon of the so-called post-media age in which photography and film can be edited to morph into each other on their shared digital devices that produce and display them, but also as one of the most versatile figurations of intermediality in cinema with a special significance in the Eastern European context. Prolonged tableau shots framed to resemble a photograph or painting (sometimes also as direct references), the gesture of ‘freezing into an image’, the fascination with the arrested, tableau vivant-like pose perceptible on the border of stasis and movement (consequently, in-between photography, painting and moving image) have become hallmarks of a pictorial stylisation that conveys a whole spectrum of sensations and connotations linked to the tension between the inevitable transitions, displacements in the world or the transitoriness of life itself and a subjective state of paralysis and immobility. As a climax of an ever more polished visual form, Béla Tarr’s last film, *The Turin Horse* (*A torinói ló*, 2011) performs exactly such a process of the moving images giving way to a series of photofilmic tableaux. ‘Balancing between film and photography, and through a minimalist, repetitive narrative, Tarr stages no less than the end of the world itself as an ultimate “standstill”’ (Pethő 2015b: 242), unfolding the still photographic frame from slow camera movements and long shots,¹⁰ and fading away in the end into total darkness and imageless-ness. Hajnal Király (2016a) sees this preference for slowness and stillness primarily as a poetic technique within an allegorical mode of expression that prevails also in other contemporary Hungarian films, and interprets it, based on Julia Kristeva, as a figuration of melancholia and the manifestation of the Freudian ‘death drive’ described by Laura Mulvey, which underlies narratives advancing towards a halt or melodramatic ending involving death.

This recurring theme of imminent death aestheticised in an image is underscored by uncannily frequent imitations of Mantegna’s and Holbein’s famous paintings of the Dead Christ in the form of ‘cadaverous tableaux vivants’ in which a live body is displayed as a corpse. We have several studies that expound the rich signification of such performative images which excavate the visual repertoire of masterpieces in fine art and exert their mystifying magnetism even when appearing merely as fleeting sensations of *déjà vu* in the works of Péter Forgács (Sándor 2014a), Kornél Mundruczó, Benedek Fliegauf, Ágnes Kocsis (Király 2016a), Andrey Zvyagintsev (Pethő 2016: 246–9), or Cristi Puiu (Pethő 2018: 177–8).

A two-minute short film created by two young Hungarian filmmakers (Attila Damokos and Marcell Nagy) in 2012 with the title *Homunculus*¹¹ sums up the way such tableaux of 'live corpses' function in Eastern European films. The film consists of a poetic montage opening with images suggestive of the biological conception of life followed in quick succession by the close-up of an older man, a collage of picture frames, alchemical symbols and glimpses of a fashion photography session with a young black woman. It concludes with a composition in which film, photography and installation art are alloyed in a single image: we see the woman holding the man in the well-known pose of Michelangelo's *Pietà* (Figure 0.1), tracing in this way a trajectory of image associations from life to death, from biological to artistic creation, from bodies to images. The viewer may observe that the man facing the image of the inception of life and ending up as Christ in the *Pietà* is János Derzsi, whose statuesque, carved features have been engraved in our memory through the cinema of Béla Tarr. Thus, epitomising the 'insider' intertextual references woven into the films of Eastern Europe, the short film pays homage to the *Turin Horse* made just a year before, in which János Derzsi embodied a man facing not the beginning but the end of the world, and was shown in poses reminiscent of paintings. However, this connection to Tarr is not exclusive, more universal and non-localisable associations subvert the religious/painterly iconography and cinephile reference as we see that an enigmatic African woman is cradling a white man, a young fashion model is photographed with an old man in a decaying yet photogenic house. This reminds us how such a tableau can not only appear as a projection of a world slowly overcome by inertia or melancholia (as previously mentioned studies have demonstrated), but it can effectively pull the fictional world away from the reference frame



Figure 0.1 Attila Damokos and Marcell Nagy: *Homunculus* (2012). Film, photography, installation art and opaque symbolism alloyed in a single image paraphrasing the *Pietà*

of reality through the opaque amalgamation of symbolism, and can always aggregate different levels of abstract significations through the emblem-like density of the image.

There are also many instances in which the role of art references in images goes beyond confronting the mortality of the body with the immortality of art and opening up the image towards multiple philosophical interpretations. A striking example of this can be seen in Radu Jude's film, *Scarred Hearts* (*Inimi cicatrizate*, 2016), a story of a terminally ill young poet, whose tragic last months in a sanatorium are presented against the backdrop of the rise of fascism, and whose death is prefigured by a shot in which we see him in the hospital in the familiar foreshortened pose of Mantegna's Christ, with his father at his bedside (Figure 0.2). The film is loosely based on the autobiographical writings of Max Blecher, a multi-talented Romanian Jewish artist who died of bone tuberculosis in 1938, and whose drawings and thoughts are extensively quoted in the film in intertitles fragmenting the string of tableaux shot with a static camera and neatly composed into the confines of the Academy ratio, with rounded corners added as a further gesture of cinematic calligraphy imitating the cropped edges of old photographs.



Figure 0.2 A paraphrase of Andrea Mantegna's painting, *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* in Radu Jude's *Scarred Hearts* (2016)



Figure 0.3 An allusion to Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp* in *Scarred Hearts* (2016): an extreme emphasis on corporeality and aestheticism in the images of 'bodies dying into art'

The beauty of the images in Jude's film is in stark contrast to the harrowing depictions of the torturous medical procedures the protagonist has to endure, as, for example, his torso is pressed into a body cast or an abscess is drained of pus with a giant needle. One of these terrible scenes appears as a paraphrase of Rembrandt's famous canvas, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp* (Figure 0.3). This picturesque frame may be symptomatic for another important role of such tableaux vivants, namely that despite the fact that they can always elevate these narratives into 'lessons', multi-layered allegories of a troubled existence in Eastern Europe,¹² the images of these bodies 'dying into art' often paradoxically intertwine almost irreconcilable extremes: from the emphasis on the sensation of corporeality, the visceral affect of the 'dissection' of the body to the distancing effect of a conspicuous artificiality and aestheticisation. Thus they also combine the excessive attraction of the image through its well-crafted painterly beauty with the impulse to look away from something that is too painful to watch. György Pálfi's *Taxidermia* (2006), a gut-churning allegory of Hungary's history, is perhaps the most

representative in this respect, in which three consecutive generations are presented and each of them is defined by exceedingly naturalistic scenes showing activities involving the body (and bodily fluids), i.e. animalesque sex, competitive eating and lastly, taxidermy. In its shocking finale we see a reversal of the process involved in the tableau vivant (i.e. the objectification of a live body as the replica of a painting) by a corpse 'coming alive' through art, as a sculpture literally made of flesh.

Such an extreme emphasis on corporeality and the mortality of the body intertwined with aestheticism and an intermediality combining painting, poetry, photography and cinema in order to tackle issues of Eastern European history and culture could be seen earlier as well. In some of the films made in the 1980s, in the final decade of communist rule, some of the filmmakers experimented with a *Gesamtkunstwerk*-like film form in order to channel the deep physical revulsion against a humdrum, humiliating life and an ideologically tainted art, along with a nostalgia for beauty, a Romantic-surrealist desire for a freedom of artistic form that shunned conventions and explored the connections between the arts uninhibitedly. The most prominent examples of this are two films made in the 1980s in Hungary and Romania, Gábor Bódy's *Narcissus and Psyche* (*Nárcisz és Psyché*, 1980; analysed by Pieldner 2014b) and Mircea Daneliuc's *Glissando* (1984, interpreted as a paradigmatic work for the late communist period's 'politics of intermediality' alongside Daneliuc's subsequent films by Pethő 2011b). Sándor (2014a, 2014b) reveals how this tendency to link the experience of corporeality to the experience of intermediality takes shape in a couple of more recent Hungarian films. It appears as a philosophical meditation on liminalities of human existence and consciousness in Péter Forgács's 2008 adaptation of Péter Nádas's eponymous book, *Own Death*, which reflects on his near-death (bodily and spiritual) experiences, and it is connected to timely topics of post-colonialism, gender-based power, cultural and ethnic identity in Szabolcs Hajdu's *Bibliothèque Pascal* made in 2010. This latter is a surrealistic fable about storytelling as an escape from a harsh and pathetic reality, full of painterly constructed scenes that recount the misadventures and eventual magical deliverance of a half-Romanian, half-Hungarian woman ending up as a sex slave in a bizarre Liverpool brothel in which women pose in tableaux vivants referencing famous literary texts.

All these examples reveal the in-betweenness of body and image, implicitly, of life and art as a site where acute political, social or psychological issues can materialise in a sensuously layered and intellectually complex (also, covert and sublimated) form.¹³ Moreover, this is also a site where another very important in-betweenness emerges underpinned by a general quest for identity connected to European culture. Although this has already been

present in Eastern European and Russian literature and art throughout the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries,¹⁴ after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the communist ideology (which was based on the rejection of Western capitalism and on an all-pervasive propaganda promoting self-sufficiency and the new values of socialism), questions regarding self-definition vis-à-vis Western Europe resurfaced with renewed urgency in all areas of society, politics and culture, creating a context which cannot be disregarded when one seeks to understand the distinctive features of intermediality in contemporary Eastern European films. The penchant for inter-art allusions, more precisely, the frequent references to well-known European paintings, connect the cultures of the East with the West and highlight a kind of Europeaness in Eastern European cinemas which is both reaffirmed as an abstract set of ideals evoked by the shared cultural heritage of 'grand images' (usually reinforced by biblical or archetypal symbolism, therefore appearing as something stable, relatable and uncontested) while at the same time, they appear to be continuously questioned or undermined by narratives comprising situations of crises, and by images of disturbing, violated, dismembered, diseased bodies. These allusions to masterpieces of European art speak of an Eastern Europe struggling to redefine and reassert itself in-between East and West. On the one hand, they evoke the legacy of a bygone historical Europe before modern times united by a common Christian culture. On the other hand, they prolong and rely on a way of thinking inherited from the more recent, communist past, when art, paradoxically, constituted the only 'real' connection to Western Europe. While in most countries there were severe restrictions imposed on travelling and on concrete physical contact with the world beyond the Iron Curtain, quite surprisingly, there was no ban on the availability of high culture (world literature was translated, some foreign language books and periodicals were imported, people could buy music records and art history books, watch art-house films, there were quality theatre productions, cultural programmes on TV, etc.). In fact, the typical communist household of an Eastern European intellectual (and not only) was filled with bookcases, paintings and other artworks made by local artists, as culture was indeed affordable to the masses. Each such household became in this way a private cultural haven (sometimes a fortress of resistance) in which people, while living in isolation, could develop a deep-rooted and personal relationship with fragments of Western art and culture, a relationship that defined them as equals to those who had the good fortune to live in the free world.

These legacies coexist with the new global influences brought along with the collapse of state socialism and inform an art that reflects on specific issues arising from social changes, political instabilities and also economic mobilities involving large numbers of the populations moving back and forth

in-between Western and Eastern Europe. Király argues that art references liberate contemporary Romanian films from provincialism, and initiate 'a discourse lamenting over the loss of Western, Christian and local values' (2016b: 67) endangered in the post-communist era. Direct references to sculptures by Romanian-born Constantin Brâncuși, for example, foreground the conflicting facets of the Europeaness of Eastern European art, the transient nature of values and a process of self-colonisation or 'self-othering'.¹⁵ In the case of Romanian cinema, among others, Király (2016b) and Pieldner (2016a) have also revealed the relevance of allusions to Byzantine iconography mixed with Western pictorial references in highlighting the perplexing entanglement of cultural ties. The uncanny rituals of 'becoming an image' exemplified by the predilection for the use of tableaux vivants, may signal in this way a 'nostalgia for belonging', 'a yearning for a reintegration into something universal and lasting' (Pethő 2016: 252) amid acute crises of identity, precarious conditions for existence and artistic creation, together with a disillusioning clash of myth and reality implied also by the disturbing aspects of the depictions of corporeality mentioned earlier.

Beside 'regular' feature films, similar polarisations of bodies and images as well as cultural dialogues between Eastern and Western art can also be found in a unique corpus of 'post-cinematic' films directed by Lech Majewski, Sharunas Bartas and Ihor Podolchak. These authors from Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine have created films that consist of loosely connected tableau vivant-like scenes presented in mere succession which not only make them resemble art gallery movies but can also be displayed as installation art, and which emphasise a palpable interpenetration of art and life. Majewski's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (2004), which unfolds a poignant love story retrospectively through the video recordings made by the protagonists, may be interpreted as a reflection upon the decomposition of cinema in the post-media age¹⁶ and a celebration of the sensual wonders of both life and art through the repeated rituals of creating 'living pictures' based on Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden*. *The Mill and the Cross* (2011) mixes painted backgrounds, photographic techniques within a digital collage that presents in a self-reflexive and metaleptic loop (incorporating both the painter, Pieter Brueghel the Elder, and his models within the painting) the creation of *The Procession to Calvary* (1564) within a palimpsest of narratives (weaved from the story condensed into the painting coming to life in the film, the story of the painting as an artwork together with its art historical interpretations) and a juxtaposition of narrative modes (characteristic of painting, cinema, theatre, literature). Life is framed by the act of painting and, the other way round, the painting is framed by the anonymous, everyday life lived by the people depicted in the shadow of the 'grand narrative'

of the Passion of Christ. *Glass Lips* (2007), assembled by Majewski from independent video shorts originally shown as a gallery installation with the title *Blood of a Poet* (as a deliberate homage to Jean Cocteau), offers variations on the interconnectedness of humans and the inanimate world, and repeatedly unfolds paintings into bodies and gestures, or representations into sensations of flesh. The common denominator in Majewski's *The Roe's Room* (*Pokój saren*, 1997), Sharunas Bartas's *The House* (*A Casa*, 1997), and Ihor Podolchak's *Las Meninas* (2008) is that in each of them there is a house as a setting of a kind of lyrical autobiography or dreamlike vision, as a space where sensual impressions, recollections are reshaped by an artistic imagination. The autonomous scenes of everyday activities in these works, the lingering on details of the *mise en scène* and gestures create a world in which 'art, perception and memory, present and past become parts of the same organic rhizomatic network' (Pethő 2015a: 175). There is an oscillation between 'the logic of sensation' in a Deleuzian sense disfiguring the image into mere 'flesh and nerve' (Deleuze 2003: 45), or by 'thinking' directly through gestures of the body (Deleuze 1989: 189) and the constant re-composition of the frames to resemble paintings. By building tableau compositions around details of bodies these films perform at the same time a continuous recovery of the 'lost gestures' that Agamben (2000: 49–63) claimed to be the essential 'element' of cinema.

We see an increased emphasis on gestures in slightly more traditionally conceived narratives as well, in two films set in typically cramped Eastern European apartments. *It's Not the Time of My Life* (*Ernelláék Farkaséknál*, directed by Hajdu Szabolcs in 2016), a film about a couple returning after a failed immigration to stay with their relatives, and *Sieranevada* (directed by Cristi Puiu in the same year), depicting a lengthy family gathering commemorating the death of the father, exemplify, however, another type of 'contaminated' form. This time we do not have a mixture between film and gallery art, but one that makes the viewer part of an experience resembling something in-between reality TV and site-specific theatre (in which plays are staged within the confined space of people's homes), and in which art 'bleeds' into the perception of reality and vice versa. Hajdu's film is in fact a rewriting of an actual immersive, site specific theatre production that he wrote, directed and acted in, performed both before and after making the film, so the two works (film and theatre play) became companion pieces, expansions of each other. Puiu's *Sieranevada* was also accompanied by another work, this time a seemingly autonomous series of mostly landscape photos shot at the outskirts of Bucharest, the product of an artistic photography project prompted by the search for a poster image for the film and exhibited with the same title as the film, first in two major cities in Romania then in Paris.

This complex relationship of interrelated artworks conceived in different media attests to the commitment of contemporary Eastern European directors to experiment with intermediality in refreshing new forms, an experimentation that has a special affinity with current trends in the visual arts. A further eminent example of this is Corneliu Porumboiu's *The Second Game* (*Al doilea joc*, 2014), which recycled an old TV broadcast of a soccer match in its entirety with the only addition being the audio track commentary of the dialogue between the director and his father who was the referee of the televised game. The result is an exercise of slow cinema bordering on installation art, and a peculiar imprint of both past and present, visible and invisible, historical and private¹⁷ (see Blos-Jáni 2018: 152–4; Pethő 2019).

Finally, in trying to assess the productivity of employing the viewpoint of intermediality within the study of any kind of films, in this case within the study of Eastern European cinema, we have to keep in mind two interconnected questions: what does the analysis of intermediality reveal about the films (i.e. about their power to present and represent), and, reversely, what does the analysis of these particular films reveal about intermediality? As all of these previous studies have shown – by relying on the expressivity, the cultural associations and the interplay of the arts – intermediality can deliver inexhaustibly rich resources for introspection. Techniques of intermediality are seldom deployed solely as art for art's sake aestheticism or formal experimentation in contemporary Eastern European films. Although the works of Lech Majewski (an author, who can arguably be situated in-between East and West, having made films both abroad and at home) are often criticised by his fellow countrymen as empty exercises in style,¹⁸ such a reception of his *oeuvre* ultimately only underscores the potential of intermediality to elicit controversies through a clash of expectations, and to provoke discussions about the relationship between art and life. Whenever it is most effective, intermediality always operates on tensions palpable in sensuous forms that raise questions to which there are no easy answers, in several instances through a perspective lodged in-between personal experience and aesthetic distance.

CONTRIBUTIONS IN THIS VOLUME

This collection of essays proposes the examination of intermedial strategies in the cinemas emerging after the collapse of the former Eastern Bloc.¹⁹ Its aim is to offer neither a comprehensive survey of these cinemas, nor an exhaustive compendium of stylistic devices deployed in various genres or authorial *oeuvres*, but to open up new perspectives in their interpretation through a series of essays combining in-depth case studies, comparative analyses and theoretical investigations. Intermediality is explored in this book, in this way, at the

cross-section of film history and theory. The chapters seek not only to enrich our knowledge of the cinemas of Eastern Europe and Russia, but in equal measure – in the spirit of the two, interlocked questions posed before – to contribute to the understanding of intermedial phenomena (their role, their diversity and their possibilities of interpretation) in contemporary cinema as a whole. Through different theoretical approaches and thematic focuses, the book attempts to map meaningful areas of in-betweenness including the intermedial and inter-art relations connecting cinema, music, theatre, photography, painting, sculpture, literature, language and the technologies of the moving image. All of these appear in the context of other tensional interrelationships on the level of the narratives, and become manifold passageways both to palpable, even visceral experiences (or imaginary extensions) of the real, and to more abstract reflections upon life.

The first part of the book is dedicated to the foregrounding of sensations and affects through perceivable modulations of the cinematic medium absorbing the expressivity of other arts. This part, entitled, ‘Entangled Sensations, Cinema in-between the Arts’, comprises four chapters. The first, ‘Intermedially Emotional. Musical Mood-Cues, Disembodied Feelings in Contemporary Hungarian Melodramas’, written by Hajnal Király, presents a distinct group of films that can be considered as melodramas presenting female protagonists struggling with a patriarchal society. However, instead of abiding by the conventions of the genre involving the representations of emotions, these films often operate with mood cues, visual and auditory (most prominently musical) figurations of a melancholic sense of loss and helplessness which compensates for the lack of bodily excess and ensures spectatorial embodiment through the congruency, contrast or competition between image and sound. In a similar vein, Judit Pieldner’s chapter, ‘Black-and-White Sensations of Intermediality and Female Identity in Contemporary Polish and Czech Cinema’, addresses the monochrome image as a place suspended between the real and the mediated, action and emotion, past and present. It demonstrates how female characters are shaped through the aesthetic of black-and-white against the backdrop of distinct periods of twentieth-century history, and vice versa, analyses ways in which the encounter of the female topic and the monochrome template has produced modes of representation that enhance the amalgamation of media, creating cine-photographic universes of particular atmosphere.

In the next chapter, ‘Sculpture and Affect in Cinema’s Expanded Field’, Ágnes Pethő unravels the intermedial and inter-art admixture of sculpture and cinema in the posthumously released magnum opus of Aleksey Gherman, and the subsequent work of his son, Aleksey Gherman Jr. The films of the two Ghermans share the ambition to expand the cinematic experience

towards the plastic arts but in two different, yet equally paradigmatic ways, revealing two distinct ways in which an 'intermedial sensibility' may emerge in contemporary cinema. *Hard to Be a God* (*Trudno byt bogom*, 2013) provides unique insights into the performative value and the phenomenology of what we can conceive as the cine-sculptural. *Under Electric Clouds* (*Pod elektricheskimi oblakami*, 2015), on the other hand, foregrounds sculptures in film more literally within the context of contemporary culture and the productive overlaps between the domains of cinema and installation art. The essay also examines how these connect to specific Russian traditions and how the sculptural images and images of sculptures activate different relations to language. Mareike Sera continues to describe the expressivity of sculptural masses within film in Chapter 4, in the films of the world-renowned Czech animator, Jan Švankmajer. Through case studies that span several decades of his activity, she offers a media anthropological and philosophical incursion into his works which are intersections of theatrical, photographic, musical, graphic, poetic, sculptural and architectural worlds. She discusses gestures through which stop-motion animation engages with objects, and film as an excessive and hybrid medium is able to assimilate multiple medial 'densities' resulting in a fragile ontological status of multiple worlds.

Part 2 of the book, 'Immersions into Memory, Culture and Intermediality', groups together essays about films which seem to combine some kind of symbolic journey into the realm of personal or collective history with laying out variations of specific intermedial relations. Christina Stojanova's chapter, 'Trickster Narratives and Carnivalesque Intermediality in Contemporary Romanian Cinema' pulls together the Jungian and post-Jungian understanding of an archetype and the principles of Bakhtinian dialogism and identifies a carnivalesque form of intermediality in contemporary Romanian cinema. She discusses the fascination with re-enactments and the variety of (amateur, improvised, non-professional) audio-visual inserts, displayed both by the masters of the Old and New Romanian cinema, which emphasise through their 'unrefined' and even 'vulgar' status, and their association with Trickster narratives, the unlimited abilities of cinema to imitate and to become truly polyphonic while playfully venturing into unexpected cultural and psychological depths.

The next chapter, written by Melinda Blos-Jáni with the title 'Photographic Passages to the Past in Eastern European Non-fiction Films', investigates Eastern European 'memory films' that experiment with photo-collages weaved into moving images in order to visualise the exterior and the inner realities of their subjects. Three different types of photo-filmic hybridities are identified in Hungarian, Romanian, Polish and Slovak non-fiction films which draw on both the photograph's failure to represent its object in totality

(its lacanuary relationship to the truth, theorised along the ideas of Georges Didi-Huberman) and its 'graphic' expressivity, thus redefining the correlation between photographic representation and traumatic experiences of the past. Katalin Sándor's essay examines a similar incursion into the past through the case study of Jasmila Žbanić's *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales* (2013), a filmic memorialisation of crimes, atrocities and mass rapes committed during the 1992–5 Bosnian war that have not been officially recognised. Frames that disclose the cinematic image in its sensible fusions with photography, the non-cinematic practice of private video diary and fragments of performance art are discussed as constituents of an intermedial cinematic discourse conveying a personal engagement with collective trauma in a particular socio-historical context as well as a mode of addressing the aporia of its representation.

Fátima Chinita has chosen to analyse a film that epitomises digital cinema as an ultimate immersive hyper-medium, a container for the arts and media. In Chapter 8, she describes Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (*Russkiy kovcheg*, 2002) not just as a technical tour de force on account of being shot in one uninterrupted segment of ninety minutes, but as a voyage through time and media. Her analysis unravels the fictional journey of a French marquis of the nineteenth century and an unseen contemporary character through the rooms of the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg as a sensorial experience leading the viewer through a series of variations of tableaux, in which the metaleptic intermingling of human beings from different time periods and 'realities' combine immersion with immediacy in a way that is similar to contemporary immersive theatrical performances.

The third and final part of the book, 'Reflections upon Reality, Representation and Power', comprises four chapters that deal more explicitly and critically with the relation between the experiences of the real, the corporeal and various media representations. First, Małgorzata Bugaj examines how the distinctive style of Alexander Sokurov's family trilogy is marked by a certain oscillation between the immediate and the (re) mediated. The painterly effect of the images of *Mother and Son* (*Mat i syn*, 1997) is combined with the extreme close-ups exploring the skin. In *Father and Son* (*Otets i syn*, 2003) cinema stages a dialogue between the biological dimension of corporeality and the medical representation of the body. While *Alexandra* (2007), set within a clear sociopolitical context, explores the senses of touch and smell, and thus emphasises the trace of the physical presence on screen.

Zsolt Gyenge proposes a discussion about the conceptual aspects of a film made by one of the leading directors of New Romanian Cinema with the essay, 'This is Not Magritte. Cornelius Porumboiu's Theory of Representation'. He breaks down the theoretical implications of Porumboiu's 'visual philosophy'

through the close analysis of several scenes. In doing so he aims to move beyond the usual discourse on realism and minimalism that has almost completely dominated the critical reception of New Romanian Cinema for some time. Instead, he focuses on the (inter)mediality of communication and representation in order to bring into relief the implicit philosophy of power in Porumboiu's meta-cinema, and to provide a more nuanced media theoretical interpretation of his films.

Gabriel Laverdière's essay, 'Intermedial *Détrompe l'Oeil* and Contemporary Polish Narrative Cinema', examines three contemporary Polish films, *The Wedding Banquet* (*Wesele*, 2004), *The Egoists* (*Egoisci*, 2000) and *Suicide Room* (*Sala samobójców*, 2011), in which the grainy DV images prompt the viewer to briefly detach from the film's referential construction (i.e. the inherent *trompe l'oeil* effect of the cinematic medium), creating a kind of *détrompe l'oeil*, the unveiling of a more raw, direct experience of the real. Through a combination of glossy, high-definition digital images and low-resolution video, the films are able to articulate a critical commentary on contemporary society enmeshed by practices involving digital technologies.

The final chapter of the book, Bence Kránicz's 'Superhero Genre and Graphic Storytelling in Contemporary Hungarian and Russian Cinema', confronts the questions of the real and the intermedial on another level. It examines how certain contemporary Eastern European films use superhero figures rooted in American comic books, and adapt the aesthetic of graphic storytelling. The essay also deals with questions concerning post-socialist interpretations of superheroes, while also touching on the connections between national mass culture, folklore and contemporary genre films.

This collection does not aim to test the validity of a limited number of theoretical categories that could be applied to a selected group of works in a standard methodology of analysis. It aims specifically to present intermediality as a phenomenon of in-betweenness that resists containment and allows glimpses into an instable and densely layered world experienced with often contradictory perceptions. By proposing a series of different vantage points for analysis and interpretation, the essays in this book investigate the variety of intermedial strategies employed by contemporary Eastern European and Russian films as effective means to communicate how the cultures of the region are caught in-between East and West, past and present, emotional turmoil and more detached self-awareness. They demonstrate how a focus on intermediality can not only reveal a cross section of representations and media within cinema, but also a variety of sensuous or intellectual modes for addressing important issues of art and society, identity and history.

Acknowledgment: Research for this book was funded by grants of the Romanian Ministry of National Education, CNCS – UEFISCDI, awarded for projects number PN-II-ID-PCE-2012-4-0573 and PN-III-P4-ID-PCE-2016-0418.

NOTES

1. The survey is limited to studies written in English. I am aware that this may not represent all the scholarship of the region, nevertheless, due to the fact that recently more and more Eastern European scholars publish in English (while relying in their researches on sources that include relevant scholarship in their mother tongue as well), the overall picture may not be too distorted.
2. For a possible typology of intermedial researches laying out the pivotal notions which define them and the main avenues pursued by such studies, see Pethő (2018).
3. In an article that further exemplifies this method, Lutas (2017) provides examples of intermediality gleaned from several contemporary Eastern European and Russian films and classifies them according to Elleström's terms of 'transmediation' and 'media representation'.
4. Articles about literary adaptations could in fact be the subject of a different review, as adaptation studies – although having many connections with the study of intermediality – can already be considered a highly prolific and autonomous area of scholarly researches.
5. Some of the chapters in this book (as indicated in the acknowledgements at the end of the texts) are also outputs of these research projects.
6. The series of international film and media studies conferences organised at the Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania in Cluj-Napoca as parts of these research projects also contributed to the debate around issues of intermediality. Detailed information about these conferences are available at <<http://film.sapientia.ro/en/conferences>>, linked to a selection of the presentations made accessible on YouTube, on the Sapientia Film Conferences Channel at <<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOAHvaV2kCOSqQ9XrumoIRQ>> (last accessed 12 June 2019).
7. See more about this in Pethő (2018: 168–74).
8. See Pethő (2011a: 41–2) where, based on the works of Henk Oosterling (1998) and Joachim Paech (2002), performativity is presented from several points of view as one of the key aspects of intermediality. The trailblazing research activity of Lúcia Nagib (e.g. 2013) has further elaborated on this idea by foregrounding the political aspects of cinematic intermediality as something inseparable from its aesthetic dimension.
9. Here I would like to apologise to the reader for the numerous self-references in this overview that I could not avoid. This summary was written with the purpose of offering an introduction into the key ideas and methodologies emerging from previous literature in the field, as well as providing a list of publications that could be used by other researchers interested in the intermediality of Eastern European

cinemas as stepping stones in their future work if they decide to explore similar issues or debate these ideas.

10. The essay compares Tarr to Pedro Costa who employs a similar yet slightly different aesthetic strategy in his *Fontainhas* trilogy, portraying people 'whose entire lives are defined by deep and unsettling changes, yet their days are consumed by immobility and inertia' (Pethő 2015b: 251).
11. The film is available on Vimeo at <<https://vimeo.com/52296851>> (last accessed 12 January 2019).
12. See the allegorical features of intermediality in Hungarian and Romanian cinema explored in further analyses by Király (2016b) and Sándor (2016).
13. In several Hungarian films made after 2000, as Király explains (2015a), the emphasis on the senses (e.g. the avoidance of touch versus the representation of smell and the control of the gaze) acts as a similarly indirect way of depicting social or political problems.
14. See, for example, the opposition of Slavophiles to Westernisers in nineteenth-century Russia (and the famous literary quarrel between Fyodor M. Dostoevsky and Ivan S. Turgenev in this context), or the Francophilia of nineteenth-century Romania aspiring to become 'the Belgium of the East' with Bucharest defined as 'little Paris', the ambivalent feelings of the Hungarians towards the Austro-Hungarian empire, and so on.
15. See articles dealing with the topic of the legacies of the past, Europeanisation and practices of self-colonisation in East-Central European Fiction Film (between 1980 and 2000), but not including techniques of intermediality, in Volume 9 issue 1 (2018) of the journal, *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*.
16. The analysis of Majewski's film (Pethő 2014a) proposing this interpretation is part of a larger essay in which three films, inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's famous painting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, are used to exemplify three film historical models of intermedial 'in-betweenness'.
17. This blending of the historical with the private appears also (in different ways) in the films of Hajdu and Puiu mentioned before, which combine a fictional yet highly typical story that could be anyone's in Eastern Europe with some deeply personal elements. Hajdu shot the film *It's Not the Time of My Life* in his own home with the participation of his own family, Puiu was inspired by his own father's death in creating *Sieranevada*, and included photos of his daughter and home in his exhibition of photography. For a comparison of Puiu's film and series of photographs see Pethő (2018).
18. The stunning visual style of Paweł Pawlikowski, another author working abroad and held in high esteem internationally, is often met with a similar dismissal (as I have learned from several informal conversations with people from Polish academia).
19. Although the phenomenon of intermediality cannot be seen as something specific to this region, examining it in this context follows the lead of Ewa Mazierska, Matilda Mroz and Elżbieta Ostrowska's edited volume, *The Cinematic Bodies of Eastern Europe and Russia*, who contend that looking at the countries of the

former Eastern Bloc makes sense on account of their shared history and culture, 'which remains distinct even after the fall of the Berlin Wall', having 'been shaped by similar ideologies and systems of government' (2016: 2).

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